DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 146 779 FL 008 941

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TITLE An Analysis of Verb Form and Function in the Speech of French Immersion Pupils. Working Papers on Bilingualism, No. 14.
INSTITUTION Ontario Inst. for Studies in Education, Toronto. Bilingual Education Project.
PUB DATE Oct 77
NOTE 16p.; For related documents, see FL 008 939-942; Paper presented at the Conference of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education (Fredericton, New Brunswick, June, 1977)
AVAILABLE FROM Bilingual Education Project, the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 252 Bloor St. West, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 1V6 (as long as supply lasts).

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Bilingual Education; Bilingualism; *Bilingual Students; Elementary Education; *Elementary School Students; *French; *Immersion Programs; Language Instruction; Language of Instruction; Language Patterns; Language Programs; Language Research; *Language Usage; Second Language Learning; Verbs

ABSTRACT

This pilot study investigates the performance in French of five English-speaking children, who are enrolled in their sixth year of a primary French immersion program in a Toronto elementary school. From speech data obtained in individual interviews, an analysis is made of the students' control of the French verb system. The subjects are found to use verbs with almost as much frequency as native French speakers, but they produce a smaller variety of verb forms. One verb form that they appear in general unable to produce is the conditional. An analysis of how the immersion children endeavor to communicate the hypothetical function, commonly realized by the conditional form in French, reveals that they substitute a variety of formal simplifications, which have the effect of weakening, but not completely eliminating, the notion of the hypothetical. (Author/CLK)

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ED146779

AN ANALYSIS OF VERB FORM AND FUNCTION IN THE SPEECH OF FRENCH IMMERSION PUPILS

Birgit Harley and Merrill Swain

The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

A B S T R A C T

This pilot study investigates the performance in French of five English-speaking children, who are enrolled in their sixth year of a primary French immersion program in a Toronto elementary school. From speech data obtained in individual interviews, an analysis is made of the students' control of the French verb system. The subjects are found to use verbs with almost as much frequency as native French speakers, but they produce a smaller variety of verb forms. One verb form that they appear in general unable to produce is the conditional. An analysis of how the immersion children endeavour to communicate the hypothetical function, commonly realized by the conditional form in French, reveals that they substitute a variety of formal simplifications, which have the effect of weakening, but not completely eliminating, the notion of hypothetical.

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AN ANALYSIS OF VERB FORM AND FUNCTION IN THE SPEECH OF FRENCH IMMERSION PUPILS[1]

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Introduction

For the past six years, the Bilingual Education Project at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education has been evaluating a primary French immersion program for English-speaking pupils in a Toronto elementary school (Barik & Swain, 1975, 1976a, 1976b, 1977). In this program, which begins in Kindergarten, the children are taught entirely in French for the first two years. Thereafter, in Grades 2 or 3, they receive a daily period of English language arts, but the bulk of the curriculum remains in French throughout the elementary years.

A major goal of this program - and indeed of French immersion programs across Canada - is to produce citizens who will be able to communicate effectively in French with native-speakers of the language. Scores on group tests of French achievement indicate that primary immersion pupils are far superior in French to students in traditional programs of 20-40 minutes of French per day. However, these tests do not provide direct evidence as to the immersion students' ability to perform in French in a communicative setting. It was in order to obtain direct evidence of this kind that the present pilot study was undertaken. It provides a descriptive analysis of the performance of a small sample of immersion students in conversation with an adult native French-speaking Canadian from Montreal.

Since previous research had indicated that immersion students have some difficulty with French verbs (Spilka, 1976; Lapkin and Swain, 1977), the verb system was selected as a fruitful area for initial investigation. We were interested in finding out whether the immersion pupils operate with a simplified verb system and, if so, what kinds of simplification have taken place. On the assumption that the immersion students would have some limitations in their vocabulary and their 'formal' control of the verb system, it was considered of practical and theoretical interest to investigate how they manage to carry out specific functions for which they may not have mastered appropriate lexical items or grammatical forms.

Sampling and Procedure

The five immersion students involved in the study were randomly selected from a Grade 5 class of 34 students. The children (two boys and three girls) were all in their sixth year of the immersion program. Each student was individually interviewed in French for approximately 20-25

minutes and the conversation was recorded, using a reel-to-reel tape recorder (Uher 4000 Report L) and microphone. Every effort was made to set the interviewee at ease. Questions were directed to in-school and out-of-school topics of relevance and intrinsic interest to children of the age group concerned. The interviewer was free to extend the conversation in any direction that seemed appropriate, and was asked to introduce a minimum set of questions in as natural an order as possible. This set of questions was designed to elicit a variety of discourse types -- narrative, descriptive and expository -- which might be expected to contain differences in time, aspect and modality, with a corresponding variety of verb forms. For example, the students were invited to tell the interviewer about personal experiences from the past, to describe some classroom activities, and to talk about their dreams for the future.

For purposes of comparison, similar interviews were conducted by the same interviewer at another Toronto school with a group of bilingual children currently living in Toronto and also receiving their education in French. Three Grade 5 children (two girls and one boy) were selected from a class of 31 students to take part in the study. These three children had the following shared characteristics: they spoke French in the home with both parents, and they had received all their elementary education in French. A further comparison group consisted of three native French-speaking Grade 5 students in Quebec City (also two girls and a boy) who had been interviewed under similar circumstances by a different interviewer.[2]

To assess the immersion children's control of the verb system in French, a comparative approach was taken. The transcripts of the various interviews were analysed to determine differences between the immersion children and those in the comparison groups.

Frequency and Variety of Verbs

For example, a frequency count was carried out to assess whether the immersion children were using fewer verb 'tokens' (occurrences of verbs) in their French conversation than the comparison groups. Since the interviews with the Quebec children were considerably longer than those with the Toronto groups, all frequencies for the Quebec interviews were estimated on the basis of a thousand-word stretch of each subject's talk, selected to cover as closely as possible some of the same kind of topics that were dealt with in the Toronto interviews.

Table 1 about here

Table 1 indicates that the immersion children had, on average, approximately the same proportion of verb tokens to total number of words in their speech as did the Toronto comparison group (13.8% versus 14.0%) but a somewhat lower proportion than the Quebec group with 16.1%. Only two immersion pupils, with 13.4% and 11.5% respectively, had a lower frequency than any of the comparisons. These preliminary results, then,

TABLE 1

Frequency of Verbs in the Speech of Subjects

	Experimental Group					Toronto Comparison Group			Quebec Group		
	E1	E2	E3	E4	E5	TC1	TC2	TC3	Q1	Q2	Q3
Total no. of words spoken by subject	1585	1181	1004	1316	1056	1007	1094	819	1000	1000	1000
Total no. of verb tokens	230	178	147	176	121	146	149	113	165	178	141
Verbs as % of total no. of words	14.5	15.1	14.6	13.4	11.5	14.5	13.6	13.8	16.5	17.8	14.1
Group means (verbs as % of total words)			13.8%				14.0%			16.1%	

TABLE 2

Number of Different Verbs as a Percentage of Total Verb Tokens

	Experimental Group					Toronto Comparison Group			Quebec Group		
	E1	E2	E3	E4	E5	TC1	TC2	TC3	Q1	Q2	Q3
No. of different verbs	59	47	38	36	36	41	43	37	47	49	42
% of total verb tokens	25.7	26.4	25.9	20.5	29.8	28.1	28.9	32.7	28.5	27.5	29.8
Group mean	25.6%					29.9%			28.6%		

reflect quite positively on the immersion children. They suggest that, compared with native speakers, the immersion pupils are not, in general, avoiding the use of verbs to any marked extent.

A further analysis was conducted to determine whether the immersion children used as much variety in their choice of verbs (i.e. as high a proportion of verb types) as did the comparison groups. The results of this analysis are shown in Table 2. When the number of different lexical verbs used was calculated as a percentage of the total number of verb tokens used by each child, both the Quebec group and the Toronto comparison group (28.6% and 29.9% respectively) scored somewhat higher than the immersion group (25.6%). This suggests, as might be expected, that the immersion pupils have, in general, a smaller inventory of lexical verbs readily available to them.

Analysis of Verb Forms

Another analysis was carried out to discover whether the immersion pupils displayed as much variety in their use of verb forms as the comparison groups. In this analysis, the number of phonologically distinct verb items was calculated for each student as a percentage of total verb tokens used. For example, a particular child may have used the form /ale/ several times, at times as an infinitive (aller) and at other times as a past participle (allé), or even (very occasionally) as the second person plural of the present tense (allez). Since phonologically these forms, though distinguished in written French,[3] are identical in spoken French, they are counted for the purposes of this analysis as one distinct form.[4]

The frequencies of phonologically distinct verb forms are presented in Table 3. The results indicate a quite substantial difference between the immersion students, with a mean of 36.8%, and the comparison groups (44.9% and 45.1% for the Toronto and Quebec comparisons respectively). From this finding, it appears that the immersion students tend to rely on a smaller range of phonologically distinct forms than the comparison groups. Thus, while they are, in general, using verbs as frequently as the comparison children, they are not using as many different verb forms, and this suggests that they are operating with a simplified verb system. Further detailed analysis has revealed what kinds of simplification are involved.[5] As might be predicted, it was found upon categorizing the verb forms used, that there were some verb inflections which were produced comparatively rarely, if at all, by the immersion children. In this paper we will concentrate on one example which provides an interesting illustration of how the immersion children cope with a function for which they apparently do not have the appropriate form. By analyzing what they do in these circumstances, we hope to obtain a clearer view of their communicative competence.

A look at Table 4 suggests that the immersion students are generally unable to produce conditional forms in French which, from a formal point of view, represent a combination of the simple future with the imperfect. That is, the conditional is usually formed, like the simple future, by adding inflections to the infinitive. But in the case of the conditional, the added inflections are the same as those of the imperfect tense and thus generally distinct from those of the simple future. However, an overlap of simple future and conditional forms does occur, in some

TABLE 3

Number of Phonologically Distinct Verb Forms
as a Percentage of Total Verb Tokens

Experimental Group					Toronto Comparison Group			Quebec Group		
E1	E2	E3	E4	E5	TC1	TC2	TC3	Q1	Q2	Q3
36.5	42.1	36.1	29.5	39.7	40.4	45.6	48.7	44.2	44.4	46.8
Group Mean 36.8%					Group Mean 44.9%			Group Mean 45.1%		

TABLE 4

Incidence of Verb Tokens
in Selected Formal Categories

	Simple Future		Conditional		Periphrastic Future	
	No. of tokens	% of total vb tokens	No. of tokens	% of total vb tokens	No. of tokens	% of total vb tokens
E1	2	0.9	2	0.9	6	2.6
E2	5	2.8	-		6	3.4
E3	-	-	-		7	4.8
E4	-	-	-		2	1.1
E5	-	-	-		4	3.3
TC1	-	-	2	1.4	4	2.7
TC2	2	1.3	5	3.4	3	2.0
TC3	-	-	5	4.4	2	1.8
Q1	-	-	7	4.2	3	1.8
Q2	-	-	6	3.4	5	2.8
Q3	1	0.7	9	6.4	3	2.1

dialects, in the first person singular, so that j'aimerais and j'aimerai, for example, may be pronounced the same. Functionally speaking, the conditional in French often expresses a hypothetical state or event. And it is in this sense that we are concerned with it here.

One of the questions asked in the interviews required the children to say what they would do if they had a large sum of money to spend. In other words, it provided them with a hypothetical set of circumstances as a framework in which to specify their own hypothetical actions. In answering this question, the comparison groups unfailingly produced forms that are interpreted by a native speaker as conditional. For example:

Child	Interviewer
1a. (Q3)	Qu'est-ce que tu ferais si tu avais beaucoup d'argent?
Ben, je prendrais qu'est-ce qu'il me fallerait[6] pis heu j'en gaspillerais pas trop pour heu ... pour pas n'en manquer pis heu ... je prendrais heu qu'est-ce qu'il me fallerait pour heu ... pis un petit peu plus.	
	Tu ferais quoi avec le reste?
Ben le déposerais pis quand j'en aurais besoin ben j'en prendrais.	
1b. (TC1)	Qu'est-ce tu ferais avec l'argent?
Moi, je sais pas. Je me payerais un château. [laughing]	

In contrast, the immersion children appeared to use a variety of forms instead of the conditional, which was only used once in this context by an immersion child. Two children, for example, used, among other things, the formally quite similar simple future. The following examples show the use of three such future forms, together with the one conditional produced in this context.

Child	Interviewer
2b. (E2)	Qu'est-ce que tu ferais?
Mon père a dit qu'on achètera une fer- [far] ferme.	
	Une ferme.

Child	Interviewer
Une ferme. Et on aurait des chevaux, des poulets, des... canards	
	Mhmm, mhmm.
Etcetera.	
	Mhmm.
Et on aura un 'swimming pool'.	

2b. (E2)

	Et um qu'est-ce que tu ferais si tu gagnais beaucoup d'argent?
Comme le um --	
	La loterie
Oui, loterie. Mille dollars. Oui mhmm. Um (laisse moi) voir. Um dans l'été je /ašə ašə aš ətəRa/ on dit ça -- et /a-aš ətəRa/ un piscine	

While the occurrences of the simple future in Example 2a are certainly not incorrect from a formal point of view, and do serve to convey the idea of an event that has not yet taken place, it seems likely that the formally similar conditional was intended. By using the simple future, both children have given the event a somewhat more 'real' quality. The buying of a farm or a swimming-pool is predicted to occur. It becomes a distinct possibility, rather than a hypothetical event depending on the availability of a large sum of money. In this case, then, both the form and the function have shifted slightly but not drastically.

A more drastic shift in form occurs when the immersion students use the periphrastic future (aller + infinitive). As is clear from Table 4, this is the future form generally preferred by all groups. Three immersion students, however, used the periphrastic future not only in a future context, but also in the hypothetical context where the comparison groups regularly used the conditional. For example:

Child	Interviewer
3a. (E3)	Et qu'est-ce que tu ferais si tu gagnais la loterie? Si tu gagnais (beaucoup) d'argent?
[laughs] Je vais mettre dans la banque... et donner beaucoup à mes parents, donner beaucoup de l'argent à mes pa-parents, et...acheter un(e) ferme.	

Child	Interviewer
3b. (E4)	Si tu gagnais la loterie, qu'est-ce que tu ferais avec (cet) argent?
Je /va/ um acheter un euh comment tu dis 'TR Seven'?	

While the form of the periphrastic future (je vais mettre) is quite distinct from that of the conditional in French (je mettrais), the function is still relatively close. Once again, the event has not yet taken place, though it has become a statement of intention rather than an 'unreal' hypothesis.

Occasionally in a hypothetical context the immersion children appear to have used imperfect forms instead of the conditional. In the following example, the child has just been explaining that when you are late to school you have to take a piece of paper (i.e., note) home to your parents. The conversation continues as follows:

Child	Interviewer
4. (E3)	Ah bon. Et um si ça arrivait souvent, qu'est-ce qui arriverait, tu penses?
J'avais beaucoup de papier(s) [laughs]	

While the imperfect has formal affinities to the conditional, its function in a main clause is to indicate past time. In this case, then, a drastic functional shift has taken place, along with a less substantial formal shift. Nonetheless, it seems from the interviewer's reply (in example 5) that she has grasped the intended meaning quite easily from the context. Also, it is interesting to note that the imperfect in a subordinate conditional clause, si ça arrivait souvent, does not mean 'past' but, like the conditional in a main clause, 'hypothetical'. This could also be a factor in the immersion children's occasional substitution of the imperfect for the conditional in the main clause.

In the next example, which is a continuation of the conversation in Example 4, we find yet another form instead of the conditional:

Child	Interviewer
5. (E3)	[laughs] Mais est-ce que -- qu'est-ce que tes parents diraient? (Est-ce que) tes parents seraient contents, ou?
Non [ɛ] um. Ils ne -- Ils ne um... Ils ne ... um... Ils ne /vø/ pas être contents --	

The use of the form /vø/ in this context, which occurred in the speech of two immersion children, could be interpreted as an inaccurate translation of the English modal auxiliary 'would' that might have been used in a similar hypothetical context in English -- 'No, they wouldn't be very pleased'. This erroneous use of /vø/ might perhaps be explained by the fact that there are many other contexts in French in which the English 'would' is in fact translatable by /vø/. For example, "Would you open the window, Johnny?" Jean, veux-tu ouvrir la fenêtre?

Another explanation could be that veux is identified with vont or vais. As already noted (Example 3), the periphrastic future is also sometimes used instead of the conditional. In unstressed position with liaison (je vais être), the contrast between vais and veux may be neutralized, leading to confusion between the two verbs. Whatever the interpretation, the use of vouloir in the present hypothetical context is, however, not only a drastic change from the conditional from a formal point of view but incorrect from a functional point of view. The meaning is changed from 'they wouldn't be pleased' to 'they don't want to be pleased'.

Unlike the comparison groups, three of the immersion children also used adverbial means to help express the notion of 'hypothetical'. In all cases the adverb used was peut-être ('perhaps'):

	Child	Interviewer
6. (E5)		Et euh plus tard si tu gagnais la loterie, qu'est-ce que tu ferais? Si tu étais plus grand?
	Mm. Je peut-être /aŝte/ une um 'new' voiture.	
		Une nouvelle voiture, oui.
	Oui.	
		Mhmm.
	Et um peut-être une 'modern house' -- quelque chose (comme ça).	

In this case, the conveniently invariable adverb helps to get the idea of 'tentativeness' across.

Conclusions

These examples show that although the immersion children have clearly not mastered conditional verb forms, they have developed various means of handling the notion of 'hypothetical'. While these may deviate from what native speakers do in similar circumstances, the forms the immersion students use are not selected randomly. From a formal point of view they represent a simplification. Instead of producing the combination of simple future and imperfect forms which comprise the conditional, they appear to have overgeneralized forms from either the imperfect or the

simple future. From the simple future, it is only one step further to the use of the 'analytic' periphrastic future, which they are apparently accustomed to using in preference to the simple future in other contexts, and which approximates the similarly analytic pattern of modal auxiliary plus infinitive that characterizes the English conditional. By using the invariable adverb peut-être, a verb form can sometimes be avoided altogether, thus making for further grammatical simplification. These formal simplifications are generally not so radical that the 'hypothetical' function is completely lost. It has instead been weakened. It has become an event which is 'possible' but 'has not yet happened'.

The information gained from this kind of in-depth study of form and function in the speech of the immersion children is, we believe, not only of theoretical interest to researchers in the field of second language learning, but also of practical value to classroom teachers. By taking into account the function of particular utterances and the wider context of these utterances, including the input by the interviewer, we are able to discern systematic patterns of usage that may differ from what native speakers do. The lack of use of the conditional and many of the functional shifts that have been noted, for example, would simply not show up in a syntactic error analysis that has the sentence as its upper limit and that lacks comparative data from native speakers. In order to study usage and the mismatch of form and function, it is necessary, we believe, to carry out 'discourse analysis' along with syntactic analysis. The value of this analysis to teachers is that it provides a basis for understanding the motivation behind the errors that are made, thus allowing for monitoring that goes beyond the correction of individual errors in form.

In our view, it is important in this kind of study to look at the verb system as a whole. This enables us to relate what is happening in one area to what is going on in another area. The comparisons with native speakers can also, we believe, even help us to understand trends towards simplification that may be occurring in the language as it is used by the native speakers.

FOOTNOTES

[1]This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education, held in Fredericton, New Brunswick, in June 1977. The authors are grateful to Henri Barik, Sharon Lapkin and Raymond Mougeon for their helpful comments on an earlier version. The research reported in this article was funded in part through a grant in aid of educational research from the Ministry of Education, Ontario.

[2]Thanks are extended to Raymond Mougeon for his kind permission to use the tapes and transcripts of these interviews conducted as part of a sociolinguistic survey of French under the auspices of the Centre d'études franco-ontariennes, at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

[3]Actually, it is clear from the Grade 4 written compositions of these pupils, obtained in a test of writing skills at the end of the previous year, that the distinction is often not made in their writing. The -er inflection, for example, is a common misspelling for the past participle form, é (or ée, és, ées).

[4]Less certain is the status of an imperfect form such as allais in relation to the forms identified as /ale/. Since it could not be established from the tapes that any of the immersion or comparison children were making a clear distinction in such instances ([alɛ] as opposed to [ale]), an imperfect form such as allais was deemed to be identical to aller, and was thus interpreted as an occurrence of /ale/.

[5]A full report of this study is being compiled.

[6]This form would be faudrait in standard French.

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